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Gaspar Tomas

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Kojichk'ulal - Kojiq'b'ej – Kojinatil

Gaspar Tomas

Maya-Q'anjob'al/Akateko

Founder of Neo-Q'anjob'al

Laurens, SC

Lorenza Tomas

Maya-Q'anjob'al/Akateka

Madrina de Consejo Ancestral

Laurens, SC

Yin sb'i sk'aneb'al yib'alil yib'in q'inal, chi waq' kawil be' k'ul be' masanil. Yochwan bin k'ul yin bin q'inal, toljob' chin say tzet' chi yun wolji'te' kob'eyb'al xol heb' yalix unin chi chib'aj yul sma q'b'ej jun tx'otx' miman konob' ti'.

Greetings on behalf of the Four Energies of yib'an q'inal. My goal in life is to find ways to help preserve our culture for the younger generation that is growing up within the borders of the United States.

– Gaspar Tomas



Yin sb'i pixan cham mamin Ajsatkan, pixan xal chikay sat tx'otx', pixan k'aq'e, pixan a'ej, chi waq' kawil be' k'ul be' masanil. Jun bin nab'al yin bin q'inal, tol chin say tzet' chi yun wolji'te' jantaq juntzan watx'il nab'alej aq'b'il kan yuj heb' cham komamin, k'al heb' xal kochikay, yet watx' chi yun yion sb'ey sb'a kob'eyb'al yuj heb' acbej/q'opjoj yin tx'olilal.

Greetings in the name of Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, Heart of Wind, Heart of Water. In life, I wish to give life to the ancestral teachings of our grandfathers and grandmothers so that the youth can live up to their legacy.

– Lorenza Tomas

Abstract: Brother and sister discuss Maya community organizations in South Carolina and describe how the Church and Maya heritage work together. Their own path to becoming aware of Maya heritage and their establishment of an active and productive Maya youth group give a powerful example of the possibilities for a better future. They hope to connect with and build relationships with other Maya youth groups in the United States.

Keywords: community, Maya, Maya spirituality, Catholic Church, school, Maya heritage

Introduction

Lorenza and I are sister and brother “Maya Americans” from South Carolina. Both of us are the authors of this essay, but you will find two sections that were written individually. It is an honor to share with you our journey to keeping our culture alive. Our parents are from the highlands of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Our dad is from San Rafael La Independencia (Akateko) and our mom is from Santa Eulalia (Q’anjob’al). Our parents came to the United States to move away from the violence and poverty that was generated by the never-ending civil war in Guatemala. They came to South Carolina in the early 1990’s to join with family members that were already living here. Thus my sister and I are descendants of the Maya Q’anjob’al and the Maya Akateko. We speak Spanish, English, and Maya Q’anjob’al/Akateko. Growing up was a huge struggle especially in school. Since we were the first to be born here, our parents didn’t know English, so they only taught us Spanish and Q’anjob’al/Akateko. Starting school at 5k without knowing any English, was like living in an exotic world where you are unable to communicate with others, a world where no one understands your thoughts or feelings. These memories made us realize that this was what our people had to go through daily to survive in this country. This clearly proves the point of how desperately parents want the best possible life of us.

Growing up as kids, we would hear the adults stressing and worrying about how the culture and the language were dying. Young people no longer appreciated traditional clothing, and no longer valued ancient customs. Since there was no one to help guide the Maya migrants in the US, they were already giving up on hope. This was before the people established the community organization. One main problem seemed to be that when the parents were growing up back in Guatemala, it was risky to identify as Maya. In those times, Maya were targeted by the Guatemalan military due to the Guerrillas (rebels) that was depending on and taking shelter in multiple Maya villages. Outside forces hindered the Maya from expressing and maintaining their way of life. Nowadays

the majority of the Maya population that have migrated to the United States no longer have those outside forces interfering with their culture. Yet, many tend to use the excuses that the officials or government block the ability to express their identity. In the past, we all know the struggles that our grandfathers and our grandmothers had to go through to survive in a world where the whole country is trying to terminate them. But with great hope and faith, they were able to maintain our culture, so that we as descendants of the great Maya lineage are able to carry out their knowledge. If they were able to keep our culture alive during the darkest times of our people, we should have no excuse for not maintaining and giving life to our ancestral roots today. Our culture is dying, not because of outside forces, but because the descendants of a once great civilization that no longer value their customs and their roots. Nowadays, we are our own oppressors. We must open our eyes, come to our senses and start appreciating our ancestral knowledge for which many have given their lives just to keep in existence.

Project 46 (The Maya Legacy)

In my second year in high school, I (Gaspar) was required to do a semester-long project for my AVID class which counted as a major grade. The project was called “The Passion Project”. There were two requirements for this project. The first was to do research on a topic that we’re interested in and create a PowerPoint to teach the whole class on all that we had learned. The second was to create a demonstration or hands-on learning activity to help with a visual demonstration of what we studied. The topic that I choose was the writing system of the Ancient Maya. I was told as a kid that there was no evidence of any writing or number system in which the Maya had used to communicate or keep records of time. It wasn’t until the misunderstood 2012 Maya Prophecy became publicly discussed that I realized that the ancient Maya had a writing system and calendar (later finding out that there was indeed a number system as well).

The AVID project gave me a key to the door that would later help me regain the ancestral knowledge of my people. Since the project was to take the whole semester to carry out research on our topics, this was enough time for me to learn a handful of material. I was able to learn ancient Maya hieroglyphs (glyphs), mythology, astrology, iconography, and the tracking of time using multiple calendar cycles.

I realized that like European civilizations, my ancestors had their own mythology and philosophy on how they viewed the world. The only problem is, half of that knowledge is lost or was destroyed during the Spanish conquest. During this project, I also stumbled upon the Maya Codices. These were screen folded books that the Maya once used to keep

a record of the movement of celestial bodies and time. As of today, only three are known (Dresden, Madrid, Paris Codex) and fragments of a fourth Codex (Grolier Codex). The infamous Father Landa, during the inquisition of 1562, burned many Maya books of records and perhaps history, as Landa claimed the books represented the work of the devil. When studying these Codices, I was fascinated by the Dresden Codex, which is safely preserved in the museum of the Saxon State Library in Dresden, Germany. This codex is full of art that represents both the ancient iconography and astrology of the Maya. I also learned that the Maya had multiple ways to express their thoughts. The glyphs can be simple, complicated, or abstracted to represent multiple things in one glyph.

In working with this project, I put together two PowerPoint presentations to teach the class. I also constructed an eight-page version of the Dresden Codex along with custom name glyphs for my classmates. I named the overall project “Maya Legacy” or Project 46 with the slogan of “Our Hope, Our Future, Our Culture”. In subsequent years, I have continued searching for more information. I started to study the *Popol Vuh*, and the Q’anjob’al culture and language with hopes to preserve not only the culture itself but the origins to the ancient roots.



Figure 1: Tz'ib' Heb' Jichmam Maya, 8-page replica of the Dresden Codex By: Gaspar Tomas

Comuniḁaḁ de Los Arcáḁeles (CLA)

Most of the Maya population of Laurens had forgotten how to incorporate their ancestral customs into their Catholic faith, resulting in the loss of cultural identity. Therefore, in 2014 a small group of Maya Akateko, Q’anjob’al, Jakalteko and Chuj established the *Comuniḁaḁ de Los Arcáḁeles (CLA)*. This community is predominantly made up of Akateko from the towns of San Miguel Acatán and San Rafael La Independencia.

Other members originate from neighboring towns such as San Sebastian Coatan (Chuj), San Pedro Soloma, Santa Eulalia (Q'anjob'al) and a few from Jacaltenango. Everyone has origins from the highlands of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. The community was founded to help each other spiritually using our customs. These customs are the product of the collision of two religions; the Maya religion and the Catholic faith. The *patrones* (patron saints) of the community are San Miguel Arcangel (Saint Michael the Archangel) and San Rafael Arcangel (Saint Raphael the Archangel). They are the patron saints because they are also the *patrones* of the towns back in Guatemala. To the Akateko people, this pays homage to their birthplace and makes them feel closer to their home. The community saying is: *kojichk'ulal, kojib'ej, kojinatil* (Our faith, our role, our roots). This is also the same saying for Neo-Q'anjob'al (see below) where it is interpreted as a symbolism of the three sacred hearth stones of creation. The overall goal of CLA is to unite the people together through the Church. In partnership with the Maya community in Greenville, SC (*Comunidad Maya Guatemalteca*), predominantly Maya Chuj of San Sebastian Coatan, we are able to walk forward together as one. Paving roads and bridges between our Catholic faith and our Maya identity, for the future of our people.



Figure 2: *Encuentro* between CLA and Comunidad Maya in Laurens, SC

Neo-Q'anjob'al

What started as a school project, became Neo-Q'anjob'al, the Youth Organization attached to *Comunidad de Los Arcángeles*. Our group focuses on representing our indigenous culture and maintaining our beliefs, our language, and our customs. Our hope is to open the minds of the parents that don't see the connection between the Maya culture and the Church itself. Many are still in the mind set of living in fear because of their Maya lineage but we are here to help them realize that was in the past and that we are in a safe



Figure 3: Members of Neo-Q'anjob'al with the first Community Coordinator, Viviana

environment to let our culture thrive once again.

With the knowledge that was gathered from the previous stage of the project and countless hours of participating with the community, we had enough experience to form the first youth group in our community. Using what we learned, we were able to educate the youth through proper methods of enculturation to carry out multiple performances and activities

both for the Church and our culture in our community.

In the near future, we hope to make connections with other Maya youth groups and to create relationships in every existing Maya community in the United States. We hope to give the youth an opportunity to elect representatives that would run and compete for the title to represent the Maya American youth. This would also give a chance to meet annually to showcase works and findings that can be used to help bring light to the Maya culture for the new generation of Maya Americans.

As the children of the



Figure 4: Official flag of Neo-Q'anjob'al

great Ajaw, it is our destiny to keep our customs alive. Some may have forgotten their roots, but we are here to replant. No one shall fall because we are here to help raise one another as in the teachings of the Popol Vuh.

****Neo-Q'anjob'al also consists of multiple divisions of mini projects that help support the overall mission. For example; Snuq' Te' Koson, Estilo Maya, and with support from Comunidad de Los Arcangeles (CLA).****

Txan Txajul Un' (The Holy Bible)

Most of the Maya people will claim that they know and understand Spanish, but in reality, about 75% are unable to fully comprehend the context fully. Since one of the goals of the community is to help strengthen our faith, it is crucial for the people to understand the Holy Bible. In order to do that, it must be translated into their native tongue. Today, there are versions of the Bible translated into Q'anjob'al or Akateko but the problem is that they contain vocabulary that we do not use in the Catholic Church and terminology that is unknown to the Maya people. Not realizing this, many still use these versions every time when it is their turn of the week to read the gospel to the community that gathers to pray the rosary. I (Lorenza) decided to act by helping to translate the Bible verses every week when it's my turn to read the Gospel at rosary. I translate the Gospel into the Q'anjob'al language by using an alternative vocabulary in a way that the people will relate to and understand. By doing so, this increases chances that people will understand the hidden messages of the Gospel each week.

Dance Performances

For the dance performances that we coordinate and execute, our goal is to maintain ancestral knowledge through performances that reenact key points from the *Popol Vuh* and other traditional customs that the Maya Q'anjob'al and Akateko value in their daily life. We believe that by doing this, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the message that we are trying to promote, and in addition we are setting an example to the youth of other surrounding communities to be proud of their roots and that they shouldn't be ashamed of their identity.



Figure 5: Cruz Maya, the first performance of Neo-Q'anjob'al

The Representatives of CLA

Two years after people established the CLA community, they decided to start the practice of having representatives that would represent our community/church and our culture. As of now, we are currently on the fourth cycle. Under the titles *Madrina de Consejo Ancestral*, *Reina Flor de Los Arcángeles*, and *Princesa Flor de Los Arcángeles*, young females are nominated by the community to represent the people for one-year. Neo-Q'anjob'al is currently guiding and educating these young leaders so that our community is well represented.

Maria Lopez (*Princesa* 2016-2017), Lorenza Tomas (*Madrina* 2016-Present)
 Lorenza Tomas (*Reina* 2017-2018), Feliciana Cruz (*Princesa* 2017-2018)
 Dolores Andres (*Reina* 2018-2019), Maria Deleon (*Princesa* 2018-2019)
 Elida Manuel (*Reina* 2019-2020), Rosalinda Esteban (*Princesa* 2019-2020)



Figure 6: Princesa/Reina Flor De Los Arcangeles 2016-2020.

Kaxo21 (*Snuq' Te' Koson*)

Snuq' Te' Koson (Voice of our Marimba) is the digital preservation and promotion of our culture/marimba that represent Maya Q'anjob'al, Maya Akateko, Maya Chuj, and Maya Popti'. Snuq' Te' Koson is maintained through the YouTube channel @Kaxo21. This channel focuses on promoting the Marimba of Huehuetenango. This is also one of the digital platforms that we utilize to upload videos of all the annual works and activities from CLA and Neo-Q'anjob'al.

****Half of the revenue that is generated through this channel helps fund Neo-Q'anjob'al.****

Nuestra cultura entre los sonos de nuestra marimba que hacen eco los nombres y sentimientos de nuestros antepasados!

Kob'eyb'al xol snuq' te' koson, chi yaq'on snuq' sb'i k'al sk'usilal heb' jichmam.

Our culture within the melodies of our marimba echoes the names and sentiments of our ancestors.

– Gaspar Tomas

Estillo Maya

Estillo Maya is the name for our online store on eBay that helps generate funds that will buy materials such as traditional garments, ceremonial candles, sacred objects, flowers, live Marimba, and decorations both for Church celebrations and Cultural Events. This is the fundraiser division of our group, made solely to help raise money.